

Sermon Series: Love and Let Live “Hate Free Zone”
Matt 5:21-22; Ephesians 4:25-32; Psalm 37:1-8
Salem United Methodist Church
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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Paul McCartney’s song, “Live and Let Die” was written for the James Bond movie of the same title. We often miss the opening words while we wait for the great instrumental section. These words state, “When you were young and your heart was an open book, you used to say live and let live, But if this ever-changing world in which we're livin' makes you give in and cry, say “Live and Let Die.” What happens to us that have us crying out and acting out, “Live and Let Die.” Today’s sermon we will look at the pain and hurt inflicted on us by others and how this leads to anger and hate.

Summer is almost over. Some summer flowers look very healthy while others look all dried up. I have two pots of flowers here. One has been watered and the other one hasn’t. The one that was watered is thriving. The one that hasn’t is all dried up. Good gardeners will not only water their plants but feed them so they will thrive. And then there are the fastidious gardeners who will use weed killers to make sure those nasty weeds die. Some weed killers are advertised to kill all the way down to the root. Plants thrive when they are watered and are fed. They will shrivel up if they are not cared for and even die if weed killer is applied.

We can easily compare gardening to our relationships. If we offer words or actions that encourage one another, then people thrive and bloom. When we say words that are mean and hateful, we can actually watch them diminish in front of our eyes. They feel worthless, empty, and useless. It eats away at their self-esteem. This is nothing new. People have been mean to each other since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden. Because the message from God to us is told in many different ways, “let go of anger, leave rage behind, don’t get upset-it will only lead to evil.” We know that one of the Ten Commandments states, “Do not murder.” As Jesus did with so many of the Jewish laws, he takes this one and expands on it. “Anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder.” Wow! I think I can safely say that none of us would think about actually plotting and carrying out a plan to murder someone. At least I hope not, but the majority of us have been angry to the point where we have called others names such as “stupid,” “dummy,” “idiot,” “scumbag,” “ugly,” “fatso,” “four eyes,” “dim-wit,” and many other names that we will not say in this place! These words kill like weed killers kill plants. My first job after college was working with emotionally challenged preschoolers. One three year old boy would only say two words which he learned because he was called them over and over again. His spirit was being damaged as though someone poured weed killer on it. As his teacher my job was to affirm who he was, say positive words to him, and praise him to build his trust. I would say to him things like, “Good job!” “I’m proud of you,” “I see you are trying so hard,” or even thank him when he did something right, like hanging up his coat. At first he would mock what I was saying. He didn’t understand the words. Next he would say them over and over again. With every phrase we offered him we were increasing his vocabulary. It took a year for us to build his trust and make him feel comfortable enough to even participate in regular preschool activities.

Yesterday some of the men of this church went to visit Our House, a residential work force training facility, in our neighborhood. These young men have grown up in homes where not only were words used that killed their spirit, but many have been physically abused as well. The adults, who work with them at Our House, praise them when they are doing the right thing. The staff lets them know that they are valued by doing things like making their birthday special. Many have not had a birthday celebration in which they were made to feel special and valued. Even when they have to be disciplined or held accountable for their actions, these young men are affirmed. The director, Benny, tells them that he wants them to succeed and he knows that they can succeed. He continually pours into these young men hope. And it works! The recidivism rate of the young men who go through this program is very low. Why? Because Benny and his staff build up these broken, lost young men. The staff let them know that not only do they have value, but that they are valued. Our House offers these young men hope and skills to create a better life than they had when they arrived. Benny is looking for adult men who are willing to mentor these young men: to sit down and talk with them about life, to teach them some work skills, or take them somewhere to have fun. These young men come into this facility carrying a heavy load of disappointment, hate, and anger. They do not trust adults.

For the last few weeks our front lawn has had stacks of bricks sitting there waiting to be placed in our new

sidewalk. When I listened to the stories Benny shared with us, I thought of these bricks. These young men come in with a backpack filled with bricks. Each one represents a word or an action that weighs them down. They are hurting and they have hurt others. Benny and his staff help them not only unpack these bricks, but leave them behind. When they leave their backpack is filled with grace, kindness, and caring along with the tools and job skills to lead a successful, productive life. These boys are not alone. Many of us carry around a backpack filled with bricks that weigh us down: filled with feelings of unworthiness caused by words of hate, words that have made us wilt, or even someone's actions that have tried to kill us at our very roots. We carry around a lot of pain from our past. Some carry this around for a lifetime. What happens? This weight makes them miserable. They may inflict their pain on others by doing and saying nasty things that tear down and make others wilt. It can be stopped. And God gives us a tool to help us. It's forgiveness. We pray every Sunday, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Or as Paul wrote in Ephesians, "[be] forgiving of each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ." Forgiveness means that we give up the right to retaliate or seek revenge. It's saying, "I choose not to hold this against you anymore." We may not want to or are able to forget what happened, but we can let go of the pain. And what happens when we do? We begin to unburden the pain that we are carrying which is soooo freeing! This is our pain, not the person's who inflicted it on us. S/he may not even be aware that they inflicted it on you or remember it! So why allow all this negative stuff to weigh you down. Let it go! Throw it away! And allow God to give you the tools of grace to move on.

As I think of these images of the dying plant and the brick-filled book bag, I also think of the situation in our world. It isn't just us as individuals, who are weighed down. Our word is carrying a heavy load of hate filled imagery and angry words inflicted to create pain and division. It is so bad, it can make one angry. Paul states in Ephesians that it's ok to be angry, but instructs us to not use our anger to abuse others or the common word is sin. One way to do that he advises is to find a way to work it out or resolve the issue before the sun goes down. I counsel young couples who are planning their wedding. One of major tools that I offer them is how to resolve those issues that really bother them about their spouse, that make them angry, that frustrate them on a daily basis so that it doesn't build up until their back pack is so heavy the marriage collapses. The second way Paul suggests is to turn it into something good. As I listened to Benny yesterday, he has such passion for these young men and gets angry when the system is not trying to help them, but he turns this anger into something productive to help them.

Yes, in our world there is a lot of anger and hate. How do we as disciples of Jesus Christ create a hate free zone? How do we love and let live? It begins with the examination of our hearts. What bricks are in there that need to be gotten rid of? Faith is the language that moves from our heart to our lips. What we have in our hearts, we say and even do. It just isn't fitting for us as Christians to praise God on Sunday and then the rest of the week hurl insults, belittle and berate our family members, our co-workers, or even the person who cuts us off on the highway. John Wesley instructed us to have holy tempers. He described tempers as how we live. Our tempers are seen in our relationships with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. When we live in a hate-filled world, we can so easily acquire a deformed and disordered temper defined by hate, greed, fear, revenge, and resentment. In contrast, holy tempers exude joy, peace, love, and hope. Holy tempers are visible when God's forgiveness transforms us into a life of gratitude, when God's joy fills us as we serve those who are in need, when God's anger kindles awareness and indignation for injustice. Creating a hate free zone, holding onto a "love and let live" holy temper, begins in our hearts.

There are four phrases that can help with this. 1) Say, "I love you" to the people you care about. Or if that is inappropriate, affirm them in some way, praise them, offer encouraging words. 2) Listen to the other before you speak. So many times we don't hear what the other is saying. That can cause damage and even begin a fight. Allow that person's heart to unload. 3) Forgive as Christ forgives us. Say, "I'm sorry" and mean it. 3) Say "Thank you." We take each other for granted. By saying "thank you" we are letting the other person know we appreciate them. These four phrases can help us dethrone the hate filled zones of our world and create a hate free zone.

Reflection Questions: When was the last time you used these four phrases? What happened when you did use them? What bricks do you have in your back pack? How can God help you unpack them and get rid of them?

Resources: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/paulmccartney/liveandletdie.html>; Church of the Resurrection Sermon Series: "The Power of Words," www.cor.org; John Wesley Sermon, "Prophets and Priests"

