

Love Will Keep Us Together

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Matthew 5:38-48

Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, WA

Look at that sermon title. Go on, look at it. You know you're just humming that song to yourself. Even those of you who aren't really old enough to remember it. You know it. Come on now, let's hear the tune ..

Love

OK, you're getting it. And then it comes to the refrain. *Stop!*

I thought so. I'm dying to know just how much 1970s clothing some of you have locked away in your homes now. I can just see the silk and the polyester pantsuits.....and maybe you had your own little outfits like the Captain and Tennille wore back then too.

Love as we know it in the sense of the love God has for us, the love we are expected to show to all people, the love we are specifically expected to show to those whom we might be tempted to classify as enemies. This is the love that will keep us together – and really, the only love that can. When you hear the last part of Jesus' words from this morning's reading, you get just how big a deal this is. We might be tempted, when we are talking about love, to make it an all-encompassing thing, use language which includes everyone. Of course we should love everyone!

But Jesus took it a step further here, and with good reason. When you specifically identify the enemy as the one you have to love, that's another matter. That's not saying it's part of loving everyone, although we absolutely should be doing that. This is specific, deliberate, intentional, no 2 ways about it that Jesus commands us that the love we know from God and rejoice in receiving is to be given to those whom we might be tempted to classify as an enemy. On purpose.

Now not just because Tim Kehrli asked me if I'd be talking more about my trip to the Holy Land, although it helps – and not just because that olive tree we now "have" is at a place with a sign at the entrance which says *We Refuse to Be Enemies*, although that helps too – I think what is taking place in the Middle East fits. I think it fits also because it's easier to be forced to think about it where the idea of being enemies is much more in one's face than it is here. And I think it fits because there are places where all of this comes together where we play a role.

In a neighborhood of East Jerusalem stands a school called Rawdat El Zuhur; the name is Arabic for "Garden of Flowers." Rawdat El Zuhur is a primary school for Palestinian children, both Christian and Muslim, in East Jerusalem – the Arab portion of Jerusalem which became part of Israel after the 1967 war. The school was established in 1952 and presently is serving more than 220 largely lower-income children.

They do remarkable things at Rawdat El Zuhur. Some of you will be happy to learn – and others of you will look at your own schools and ask why they aren't doing this – that the children at Rawdat El Zuhur begin English early on, in kindergarten, and begin learning a 3rd language a few

years later. Rawdat El Zuhur seeks to bring up a new generation “that is aware of the principles of good citizenship and is concerned for the environment, capable of thinking creatively, and can analyze logically and critically.” Their students “should be ready to offer and accept positive criticism, and excel in performance; and, additionally, should be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to assume leadership in a democratic society which they will develop and preserve.”

Rawdat El Zuhur is a pretty darn neat place. I was blessed to get to visit this school during my trip. And you notice that before I said anything about it, I mentioned that you play a role in it. You do. Even if you weren't aware of this. The Rawdat El Zuhur School is one of our Global Mission partners. If and when you ever visit the school, you will get to see a little plaque on the wall which can remind all who look that it's folks like us in churches like ours who help them survive through our gifts. Next time we talk about giving to OCWM, Our Church's Wider Mission, I might just be tempted to remind you that it's because of OCWM that a school like this can exist.

As Global Ministries reports, “The economic downturn and the occupation continue to take a toll on the financial resources available to Rawdat El Zuhur. They want to continue to offer a quality education to marginalized and disadvantaged children in East Jerusalem, an education that not only includes an academic curriculum, but also the arts, physical education, life-skills, and values. However, the current financial climate makes it harder and harder to give these children in need the kind of well-rounded education that is the hallmark of Rawdat El Zuhur.”

We had a lovely tour there. We got to hear from some teachers, meet many students, and we were very impressed with the dancing and singing to which we were treated. But perhaps the most impressive thing is that they can even show up for school – teachers, students, all of them. Now here's why I say that. The school's main entrance leads to a parking lot. Now the other side of the building fronts a street, but the government refuses to give them a permit to build a door. Really. So, to enter, everyone has to cross this parking lot.

The owners of the parking lot don't like this. They've tried to stop the students from crossing the parking lot to get in. If they were to succeed, well, no one could get into the school building. Plain and simple. When we were there, our tour leaders told us of this, and imagine the spectacle of 25 clergy and laity rushing across a parking lot to get to the school door before the attendants could come after us to try to keep us from going there. This is the reality for the 220+ students and their teachers at the Rawdat El Zuhur School. Every day.

The school has also sought permission to build a pedestrian bridge of sorts over the parking lot so the students and staff won't have to go through the parking lot to get to the school entrance. Neither the parking lot owners nor the government will grant permission. There are some pretty unholy things going on in the holy city of Jerusalem.

So it's remarkable that they are still there. It's remarkable that they persist against this constant effort to close them down. I thank God that they are a Global Mission partner of the United Church of Christ and that we play a role in maintaining this school. And I thank God that they have figured out that this love God has for us, this love that Jesus spoke of in the text we read

today, has found its way to this school. There is no eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth at Rawdat El Zuhur. There is something – a recognition for the humanity of all, a love for all, even those who so easily might be classified as enemies for what they are doing to intimidate this school into closing down.

All of us were very moved, and some of us, including a certain United Church of Christ Pastor from Kirkland, Washington, we struggling to hold back tears when, after hearing their stories, the students of one class sang for us “We Shall Overcome.” This was a moment that is permanently etched in my brain and on my soul. But we were also moved by what they do at Rawdat El Zuhur when students misbehave, or turn their anger on others including those who are trying so hard to close down this school.

They go to the tree. The Ethics Tree. A prominent place in the Rawdat El Zuhur school is this tree which has as ornaments on its branches the ethics that are shared by the three religions that hold Jerusalem as a holy place – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The students are brought to this tree and they have a discussion about how their actions or thoughts go against these things which are shared values of faith, even when many in those faiths don’t live them. Love would be an example. Loving one’s enemies, as hard as it might be. The love that will keep us together, from the God that wants us together.

It’s hard, for as the song says, other sweet talking things come along singing their songs – like the songs of temptation to hate, to hurt, to retaliate – and Jesus reminds us that we shouldn’t mess around, we’ve got to be strong, and to stop – because God really loves us. It’s not easy, we have to work hard for it, and we’re not always going to feel like it is being reciprocated. These voices are turned off by many; but when all the others turn you off, who will be turning you on? God will. God will. God will. God will be there to share forever.

The students and teachers of the Rawdat El Zuhur School aren’t getting these values back from the local authorities. But when they listen and when we listen, when God turns us on and turns us to the struggling of others, we can show them the same love that they are being taught to give. What we can do here, including our support of them through our giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission but also our willingness to speak up to those who are in positions to make a difference, can remind them that of God’s sharing even across the planet, love will keep us together.

God said it before and God will say it again, while others pretend, ‘cause God needs you now and God’ll need you then. So when we’re tempted to not love our enemies, to give up because something’s too hard, to not speak up for justice because of how we’ll be perceived or because the problem just looks too big - **stop**. ‘Cause God really loves you. Stop. God’ll be thinking of you. Look in God’s heart and let love keep us together. Forever. Amen.