

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC
January 16, 2011
The Rev. Catherine R. Powell

As harmonious as we like to be, in the world beyond our walls we are constantly faced with conflict.

Our present adult education series is focusing on the Episcopal Church's relationship with the Anglican Communion which is presently caught up in conflict. Part of the conflict comes from the breadth of cultures represented in our churches: England, India, Nigeria, the West Indies. But part of it is simply that we disagree. Five bishops in England and 50 priests have left the Church of England recently to become Roman Catholics just because England is discussing the consecration of women bishops. And though much of our debate has been carried out with great respect and patience, other parts of it are becoming full of anger, sarcasm, and accusation.

And we have only to turn on the television or check out a news site to see the rancor in our national political conversations. Even the recent shocking tragedy in Tucson inspired finger-pointing and name-calling. "This wouldn't have happened if..." President Obama delivered an inspired and inspiring speech at the Tucson memorial service, but even that was critiqued by some news commentators and bloggers who just didn't seem to be able to help themselves. It was as if they didn't know how *not* to criticize.

We Christians have a response to all this, of course. Taking potshots and looking for things to complain about is not the way of Christ. But we are not exempt. You don't have to look even as far as the Anglican Communion, you can just look at our quiet but somewhat snide comments about the different styles of Episcopal Church life in town here to see how easy it is to criticize.

Since it is the weekend of Martin Luther King Day, and since the Reverend Dr. King was an expert in facing controversy and even malice, I read over a book of his sermons this week. One of them, preached in November 1957, is called "Loving Your Enemies." It speaks to our situation and I'd like to offer parts of it for your reflection.

Dr. King begins by reminding us that Jesus told us to love our enemies. We are to step out of the role of adversary and actually love even those who fan the flames of combat. Dr. King instructs us in *how* we go about loving our enemies. He suggests that first, we have to look at ourselves—an individual and as a nation. Though sometimes people are angry at us for no real reason, we must admit that at other times we are triggering their response. We must be meticulous in our self-examination and self-correction.

Secondly, Dr. King says that we must search diligently for something to appreciate and even to love in the person or group which opposes us. In Dr. King's words:

..... And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls "the image of God," you begin to love him "in spite of." No matter what he does, you see God's image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never slough off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. ... find the center of goodness and place your attention there ...

Now, in your mind's eye, imagine some political or church person with whom you passionately disagree. I don't know about you, but when I do this I find it VERY HARD to love that person. Maybe if it's

someone I know well I can remember something I have appreciated about them. But when it's an angry stranger or a talking head it's much harder. Then, think of the people Dr. King faced. I think of the newscasts or movies that we've all seen, the hatred on the faces, name-calling, even spitting and rock throwing. This loving-your-neighbor thing, as lived out by Dr. King, is a daily self-discipline. It is way beyond the politeness we're taught as children. It is a lifelong effort of will.

Dr. King does leave room for passionate response. It is just that it must be controlled, thoughtful, and never directed at individuals. In the same sermon he states that we can fight "systems" and speak forcefully about them. He even states that non-cooperation with evil systems is a moral obligation. However, we must realize that individuals, both "right" and "wrong," oppressed and oppressors, are trapped in these systems. (And our examination of these systems is crucial, but must be taken up in a different sermon.)

This kind of Christianity is not soft, easy, and nice. It takes mental and emotional effort. It takes sustained discipline. In Dr. King's sermon, he next speaks about *why* we must love—in order to stop the cycle of hate leading to hate leading to more hate, in order that our own hearts and minds not be poisoned and blinded, and in order that God's hidden redemptive power be allowed to work its transformations. He then reminds us of the example we have in Jesus.

There is a little tree planted on a little hill and on that tree hangs the most influential character that ever came in this world. But never feel that that tree is a meaningless drama that took place on the stages of history. Oh no, it is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity, and see the love of God breaking forth into time. It is an eternal reminder to a power-drunk generation that love is the only way. ...

In this season of Epiphany when we dedicate ourselves to the spread of the Light and love of God, and on this Martin Luther King weekend when we remember a saint and a prophet who showed us how to do that, let us pray for a measure of his will and courage. Let us pray that we too might make the daily effort to learn how to love every one of God's children—even those who disagree with us and thwart us - and to act out that love with unflagging determination.