

Baptizing Hatred (Mark 1.4-11)
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On Tuesday morning, I decided to preach about hate today. Which, some would say, is not a typical topic for the Sunday of Jesus's baptism. But, in my morning devotions, I'd been reading from *Jesus and the Disinherited*, a slender but remarkable book by Howard Thurman, published in 1949. And the chapter I read from Tuesday morning was titled "Hate."

You see, Howard Thurman says we can't comprehend Jesus's costly way of redeeming love until we've dealt truthfully about what needs redeeming in this world and in our lives. Specifically, we must deal truthfully with fear, deception, and hate. And Christians have been pretty sentimental in our considerations of hatred in human life. We've hoped to get rid of it "by preachments, by moralizing, by platitudinous judgments," as Thurman puts it, but we have not been willing to examine where it comes from and how it affects us when we're possessed by it.

What he sketched out was a kind of anatomy of hate. Hate often begins in a situation in which there is "contact without fellowship." He describes some of his own contact with white people in the Jim Crow South to show there can be social arrangements that allow for contact but not for true fellowship — or "fellow feeling," as Thurman called it.

Such contact can then lead to "unsympathetic understanding," which he likened to stepping into a man's office only to find him staring at you. You begin to wonder whether the top button of your vest is unbuttoned, but don't dare look down. There seems to be an attempt to size you up going on, but not a sympathetic one. This scrutiny becomes the kindling for an actively functioning ill will in you. And, left unchecked, this active ill will inflame fully into hatred, as least as Howard Thurman defines it.

Now, I'm not a psychologist or an expert on the moral emotions, but as a sinful human being, I found Thurman's framework helpful. And what rang especially true is the insight that hatred can begin with relatively benign but cold contact. A distance in the felt relationship between two human beings. But by the time that festers fully into hate, it's not just a distance. It is something we wrap ourselves in, because hatred has become a means of telling ourselves who we are.

One more Thurman description of the process, and then I promise we'll get to Jesus and John at the River Jordan. Suppose you're one of five children, he says, and time and time again, you're slighted. If there's only money for four pairs of shoes, you go without. If there are four slices of cake and one small sliver, you get the sliver. At first you think these are oversights, but when you bring them up to your brother, he says you're being disloyal to your parents. And when you speak to your father about it, you're punished, so you resolve never to mention the matter again.

But... "At night," Thurman writes, "when the lights were out and you were safely tucked away in bed, you reached down into the quiet places of your little heart and lifted out your bundle of hates and resentments growing out of the family situation, and you fingered them gently, one by one. In the darkness you muttered to yourself, 'They can keep me from talking about it to them, but they can't keep me from resenting it. I hate them for what they are doing to me. No one can prevent me there.' Hatred becomes for you a source of validation for your personality... your hatred gives you a sense of significance which you fling defiantly into the teeth of their estimate of you."

From the first chapters of Genesis, we hear that sin is broken relationships. Relationships between humans and God, between women and men. Broken relationships between parents and children and siblings, between humans and their own bodies, between us and the natural world. It's all in there. Go back and read Genesis 3 and 4 again. We need to understand the nature of our brokenness and estrangement if we're to understand something about how God goes about mending things.

Which is why today I don't want to come to the baptism of Jesus with a generalized concept of sinfulness. I want to bring the sin of hatred to Jesus and ask what his story has to say about how it is healed. God knows it's still very much alive and well.

Mark's telling of Jesus's baptism is characteristically short. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And next thing we know, Jesus is standing in line. Standing in line for this baptism. John's baptism. A baptism we're told very clearly is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, there's a fairly wide spectrum of belief about the nature of baptism among Christian traditions. But whether your baptismal theology leans catholic or leans evangelical or exists, as does mine, somewhere in the murkier middle, the simple presence of Jesus in that line says first that God addresses the sinfulness of the world, not by decree and not from afar. But by stepping into line with us as we try to make some kind of break or turn from our past, so that our sins lose some of their hold on our future.

We might assume that the doctrine of Jesus being without sin should have exempted him from this line. Shouldn't he have been more like a messianic traffic cop, posted just up the road, directing the rest of humanity to John for the washing everyone else in the world needed but him? Well, whatever our doctrines and theologies may be, they can't get in the way of first seeing that stepping into that line of sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness is precisely what Jesus did.

This should tell us something about how God works. It might also tell us something about ourselves, if we believe we're the ones who need the work.

Let's return to that slighted child, lifting his little bundle of hates and resentments out of his wounded heart, fingering them one by one as a way of telling himself that he mattered. As a way of telling himself that he was a self. The way hate works is to seal us off, just as all sin does. Don't you think Jesus's stepping into that line of sinners might have been God's way of refusing to leave us alone—literally alone—with those hates?

Recently a friend said he lost a grand old heart pine tree at his house in Alabama, which he hoped to have milled into lumber. Lovers of wood know that heart pine is nothing like the yellow pine boards you'll find in the bins at Lowe's. It's a grand and gorgeous wood. But its name might be misleading about the nature of a tree. One might assume that the most precious part of a tree is the heart. The center. The part that's wrapped up and preserved by another ring every year.

But, for a carpenter, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, you've seen heartwood. You know those landscape timbers that are rounded on two sides and flat on the other two? You can buy them for a few dollars apiece. Well, they're made from the heart of a tree, left over from logs that have been peeled like a pencil in a sharpener to make plywood. The truth is that the heart of the tree is unstable, left to itself. Leave a pile of landscape timbers unsecured and they will twist and warp and bow out of shape in no time. The heart of a tree is unstable, left to itself. It must be embedded in ring after ring of new growth to stay true.

And so it is with our hearts. Hatred feels like a form of protection and definition. But it's a false and flimsy form. We need to be embedded in the very relationships hatred grows in the absence of and cuts us off from only further. Not false forms of relationship built upon shared hatreds. If our hates are what unite us, we'll become a group of lonely, dangerous people that Jesus knew all too well, rather than the community of self-giving love he came to form.

Don't you think this might be why Jesus embedded himself in that line of sinners at the Jordan? If sin were just something that needed to be accounted for in a divine moral ledger in the heavenly places, why not settle it in the heavenly places? But he embedded himself with us, so redeeming love could not just cancel our past, but actually be put to work in our lives and our relationships and our world to heal them. To restore the defining relationships with God and neighbor that our hearts must be embedded within if they're to remain true to the image of God they were made in.

Jesus didn't stay at the Jordan River for long. But at the Jordan he embedded himself in the life of a people called Israel. He lived the costly way of love among his own people, even as they began to reject him. He expanded that love to take in outsiders as well. Women and children in a patriarchal society. The ritually unclean and sinners whose sins put them beyond society's pale. Prostitutes. Tax collectors. Samaritans and other foreigners kept showing up, as well. This love, embedded within the lives he was sent to restore, kept moving outward in rings, taking in ever more of his world.

It took in his enemies. It even took in members of the empire that everything in his culture would have conditioned him to hate with a burning, self-preserving, identity forming hatred. His way of redeeming love expanded all the way to Good Friday, and even then, even there, he did not lift a bundle of hates and resentments from his heart to reassure himself that, even crucified, he was still a self.

No, what we're told is that he loved. To the end. To the bitterest end of human hatred and cruelty, he lived the way of redeeming love. From his cross, he said, "Forgive them."

Which is to say, "Give them what they came to John for that day down at the Jordan. They still don't know what they're doing. Their hates are killing not just me, but them. And, left alone, their hearts are so unstable. They get twisted beyond recognition unless they're embedded in the rings of loving relationship You made them to live within, and sent me to live with them within, so they then might learn to grow outward into a love as large as even this."