Home Retreat 01.02.25 The Central Problem of Hate

Good morning and welcome to the penultimate talk by Richard Rohr in the series Action and Contemplation which he gave to the WCCM. I have skipped to this last talk because of its relevance today, with our world dominated by this central problem of Hate.

The longer we live in this world, we are forced to ask the question, ‘What makes so many people so mean? What creates mean-spirited people? What is behind that hate and what I just called mean-spiritedness? Maybe that’s really what we see more often than overt hatred.

Mean-spiritedness is, unfortunately, here so stay. Hate is for some reason healthy. Hate works in a lot of immediate and seemingly good ways. It unites a group very quickly, far quicker than love. It unites the disparate parts of your own ego very quickly. The ego is formed by contraction, by antagonism, while the soul is formed by expansion. Expansion doesn’t come easily because you’ve got to let down your boundaries and no one wants to do that. Contraction – whereby you can eliminate another person, write them off, exclude them, torture them, expel them – immediately gives you a sense of boundary definition, boundary superiority. Hatred, mean-spiritedness, gives a person identity even if it is a negative one. We’d sooner have a negative identity than be nothing, empty – simply **who we are in God**. Hatred takes away all doubts and free-floating anxiety, even if in a false way. It feels superior and feels in control. Hate settles the dust and the ambiguity that none of us likes. Hate is much more common and is, I’m sad to have to say it as a priest, but I think it is much more immediately effective than love. Hate makes the world go round. Just read the morning paper of any country, read the first page of any paper; it is largely who is hating who.

You could say that Jesus came to resolve the central and essential problem of hate. There is no other way to save us from ourselves, to save us from one another, and to therefore, save us, unless and until we are saved from our need to hate. That’s why people even make religion into a cover for their need to be hateful: I am hating for Jesus, so it is okay; I am hating for the United States or for Great Britain, so my hatred is good hatred. This happens every day; it’s almost the name of the game. The ultimate disguise whereby you can remain a hateful, mean-spirited person is to do it to protect the church, or to protect the country – all those good excuses. So you are relieved of all anxiety – I am still a holy person -- even though underneath, in the deeper stream, you are a hateful person. But you don’t have to see that. It’s what Scott Peck called years ago, ‘People of the Lie’.

We have done so much Utopian talk about Jesus and love but Jesus had a very hard time getting to the issue of ‘love’. First, He had to expose and destroy the phenomenon of hate, which I think is the meaning of the cross. Once you expose the lie and the illusion of hatred, love could show itself clearly. But until then, it can’t. The pattern is still the same, as Jesus shockingly put it, ‘Satan is the real prince of this world’ (John 12:31). Hate, it seems, is the ordinary daily agenda; love is the totally enlightened, entirely nonsensical way out of the ordinary agenda. The gospel presents the dilemma in a personal and cathartic narrative that grounds the whole issue in history and in one man’s enlightened response to that history. One man, Jesus, accepts the religious and social judgement of hate. We have both church and state, both Pilate and Caiphas, both power systems declaring him unworthy, declaring him a sinner, wrong, the problem. The very one, that you and I call the most perfect man who ever lived, is judged by power at the highest levels to in fact be the problem. But he bears the consequences of hatred publicly but in an utterly new way that transforms the pattern and therefore, for us, transforms the possibilities.

For two thousand years, he has remained the most striking icon of a possible new agenda. His death exposed the lie and the problem like never before. His risen life told people that life could have a different storyline. He did not just only give us textbook answers from a distance but personally walked through the process of being rejected and then said ‘follow me’ – something you only know if you have been in that position.

To speak specifically to our question, ‘What is behind hate?’ I believe that fear is almost always behind it. The people who don’t have much self-knowledge, who don’t go quietly with the poverty of a single word (the mantra): they never get to that deeper river of fear to even know that it is there, even recognise these subtle fears: fear of not looking good, fear of not being in control, fear of not having the right word. All those are fears, but they’re subtle. You’ve got to learn to see them by going right into your poverty. Sometimes it looks like it is control that is behind hatred, but even control freaks are usually afraid of losing something. Just go deeper and you’ll see. It is almost always fear that justifies our knee-jerk hateful response, a fear that is hardly ever recognised as such.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, the angels of darkness must always disguise themselves as angels of light. The best and most convincing disguise, of course, is virtue itself or godliness. Then it never looks like fear, as I said before. For fear to survive, it has to look like reason or reasonableness, prudence, common sense, intelligence, the need for social order, morality, religion, obedience or even justice and spirituality. It always works. Just give it the nice cover and you don’t have to face that underneath it is craven fear. What better way to veil vengeance and a vengeful spirit than to call it justice. You hear it on the news every night: ‘I just want justice.’ And one wonders if the inner need to punish the other, to hurt the other, has ever been faced or ever been recognised.

Brothers and sisters, let’s be honest, it is in every one of us giving and receiving this talk. When someone has made you afraid, you want to hurt them back. And that demon is not exorcised easily. Until you name the demon and admit the demon is there, you have no power in exorcising the demon. That is clear in Jesus’ exorcisms. You must name the demon correctly. Now when you pretend the demon isn’t there, you’ll never do any good exorcism. And that’s largely what we do - it’s called denial. What better way to cover greed than to call it responsible stewardship? Only people who have moved beyond ego and the controlling of all outcomes, only those practised in ‘letting go’, which is what you are doing every morning and every evening when you meditate for at least twenty minutes – ‘letting go’, ‘letting go’. You should be the experts at ‘letting go’, you are making an art form out of it. In fact, if you are not learning to let go but you’re still wrapped round your opinions, I know you’re not meditating. You are just giving yourself a name and calling yourself a meditator. To be trapped inside your own small ego, small self – what we call your false self – is always to be afraid. It is necessary to be afraid; no wonder fear is the name of the game in almost all of the world. To not have anyone you can trust is necessarily to be a control freak. Why wouldn’t you? You have to be. Those great religions try their best to free individuals from the tyranny of their small and fragile selves. It always points to a larger identity: the God self, the Christ self, the Buddha self, the true self, the only self, ‘hidden with Christ in God’ as Colossians would say(Col 3:3). The only trustworthy lover, the only trustworthy self.

Healthy and true religion, like Jesus himself, tells you that there is Someone you can trust. You do not have to create all the patterns, and you do not have to fix all of the patterns. You do not have to explain all the failures. You know you are simply in the stream that we call the mystery of death and resurrection – the Paschal mystery. What else would be the beginning of peace? As long as you think you’ve got to fix everything and control everything and explain everything and understand everything, I can promise you, you will never be a peaceful person.

Thank you for listening: I have placed a timetable below with some suggested materials to ponder.

HOME RETREAT –

Suggested Timetable (But do make your own)

11.00 Talk – The Central Problem of Hate

11.30 Read through the talk again.

11.45 Coffee break

12.00 – 13.00 Watch the interview with UNESCO reprasentative

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch break

14.00 – 16.00 Siesta/Leisure/Gardening

16.00 Tea break

16.15 – 18.00 Read Heather Cox Richardson – then watch TED talk

18.00 Vespers Live stream from the Abbey

18.30 Supper break

20.15 Compline Live stream from the Abbey

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9AGaJ4Ppkw> UNESCO talk

<https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/january-26-2025?r=2hhr63&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email> Heather Cox Richardson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xD6_Ma5vutw> TED