

Love Your Enemies

Luke 6:27-36

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This is a true story. Only the language has been cleaned up to make it suitable for church. It's about Thomas, a sort of extended relative of mine, a major cotton farmer in the fertile Mississippi Delta. One day, Thomas was driving to town in his pickup truck and a neighbor cut him off at an intersection. This was not just any neighbor. It was one with whom Thomas had a land dispute. In farming country, ownership of land is serious business, so an argument over land can make enemies real fast. Anyway, the neighbor cuts Thomas off at the intersection, and Thomas blows his stack. He shakes his fist and shouts, "I hope that son-of-a ... "gun" never changes, because I would hate to have to learn to like him!"

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I have so many questions! Jesus said, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. How do you even do that? And why would you?

How can you love someone in your own life who has treated you despicably? Someone who has abused you – physically, emotionally, financially? Someone who has betrayed your trust? How can you love someone who takes advantage of you, not just once, but every time you turn around? There are people like that! Jesus says we are to love our enemies. How do we love that person?

It has been a long time since I have had anyone in my life who feels like an enemy. But we all live in a world that is divided by nationality, by race, by religion, by territory and territorial ambition. How can we love our enemies in that world? How can we love those who would kill us, or kill those we love? How can we love someone who would take everything we have, if they could? How can we follow Jesus Christ even that far?

After the unspeakable Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, how can any Israeli be expected to love a Palestinian, who might, after all, be a terrorist? And after the total destruction of the war on Gaza, how can any displaced Palestinian be expected to know and love an Israeli?

Or how could someone in Ukraine learn to trust a Russian and then to treat that person with love? How could that person learn to pray for Vladimir Putin, the oppressor?

How can we overcome the fear and bitterness that war engenders so that human connection can blossom again? How can we do that?

We don't have to look only to the world stage. Our own nation is divided by political party and by race and by class. For each of us, no matter how we voted, there is someone "out there," or some idea of a person "out there," who is so different from us, so threatening to our own view of the world, perhaps so threatening to our own very real needs and interests, that the word "enemy" feels not too far from the mark.

We may see "them" almost as flat images - cartoons - of themselves, and we may suspect that they see us the same way. "He's MAGA." "She's woke." Everyone has a label, and the labels keep us from talking with one another, from knowing one another, from learning to live in love with one another as Jesus calls us to do. This is a challenging commandment to follow, isn't it?

For my "Ask Me Anything" sermon series this past summer, Sally Lyon asked, "How can I love my neighbor who supports the other party?" Back then, I said, "First of all, Sally, turn off your TV." Still good advice!

And then I said that when we are speaking with the people in our own lives, we should avoid topics where we know we will disagree, where we will not possibly be able to convince each other, and we should focus instead on what we know of them as human beings.

"How are your grandkids?" "Can I see your latest woodworking project?" "I just love this blueberry pie!" Just anything to remind ourselves that there is more to this person sitting on our sofa or standing in the grocery aisle - more to them than the things we disagree about so strongly.

So, let us begin there. If we are to love our enemies, let us look for something - anything - that reminds us that they may not be our enemies through and through. Even if we disagree vehemently about politics or social issues or religion, let us look for something that reminds us that we are all whole human beings. We are not defined just by the categories and labels and cable TV channels that divide us.

It is also important to remember that we can love our enemies, and pray for them, without liking them. We don't have to feel all gushy inside, but we do have to treat them as people who are worthy of love. Love is an action, as much as it is a feeling. We can wish them well. And we can pray that they find peace.

But what if this person who feels like an enemy is actually harming someone? What if they are hurting someone I love? What if they are physically abusive? What if they are trying to take away my rights? Or my child's rights? Or my property that I worked so hard for? How do I love that person?

The Bible says that we can speak truth to power, and speak the truth in love. We can advocate for those who are in harm's way. We can defend them. In fact, the Gospel of Luke would say we MUST defend them! We MUST speak out! The Christlike challenge is to do that without letting hatred fill us up and turn US into a cartoon image of ourselves, shaking our fist and shouting, "I hope that son-of-a-gun never changes, because I'd hate to have to learn to like him!"

Our scripture passage today asks us to reframe how we think about those we most fear or most despise. It says, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." That is, we are to remember that WE have also needed God's grace and mercy. We need it every day. And we are to offer that same grace and mercy to the person who feels like our enemy.

And the Bible says that our reward for this reframing, this insistence on seeing ourselves and the other person as equally in need of grace and mercy, our reward for acting with Christlike mercy and grace ourselves, is that we become children of that merciful and gracious God.

We will certainly never be as loving and forgiving as Jesus was, nor even as loving as he challenged us to be. But people should at least be able to see a faint reflection of Christ's love in our lives. There should be a family resemblance there that anyone can see.

Scholar Melinda Quivik writes, "Love of enemy means living in the hope – and acting toward the possibility – that your enemy's life can be conformed to the goodness God desires for all people. We are to pray for those who abuse us so that what is amiss in our relationships can be healed. This love and prayer ... is about turning what could continue to destroy persons and communities into actions that have in them the potential for healing beyond what we can imagine."

That is the Easter promise, isn't it? That we can all die to our old ways of living and be resurrected into a transformed life in Christ's image. That promise is available equally to us and to our enemies. It is a transformation we can pray for, for everyone.

So, let us remember that we are all more than our labels, and we are all sinners who need God's grace every single day. Let us live in the knowledge that everyone - even those we most despise - can be transformed by God's love. Even WE can be transformed. And let us speak the truth in love, always ready to defend those who are powerless.

May God bring peace with justice in our world. May God grant us the courage and the humility to follow in Jesus' footsteps as far as we can go. And may God's own grace bring healing and transformation to each of us and to those who feel like our enemies today. May we live in love.

Amen