

*Extraordinary People*  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Reading: Matthew 5:38-43

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This is a text that proves how difficult it is to be a Christian, living by the rule of love. Jesus advocates, in the presence of his closest followers, that they go beyond the normal expectations of Roman-ruled Palestine which expected nothing more of them than that they love their neighbors and hate their enemies.

He turns the tables and tells them that he expects them to love their neighbors and their enemies. He expects them to be more than ordinary people; he expects them to be *extraordinary* people. He might as well have told them that he expected them always to walk on their

hands, or never to take personally the criticism of others, or never fight back when someone destroys your property. At least that is how it sounds to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No wonder this is called a difficult text. It would be so convenient to ignore it. In the Reader's Digest Condensed Version of the Bible, this would be at the top of the list of verses to be cut out by the editors. It makes us squirm.

A number of years ago a small group of us visited the West Wing of the White House while in Washington to talk with our Senators and Representatives and other leaders. A friend with contacts in the West Wing set up our meeting. I remember that it was the week that the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after lift off. Ronald Reagan was president and George Herbert Walker Bush was his Vice President. The Iran-Contra Scandal had just recently hit the papers. It was a heady time to be in the capitol.

While touring the West Wing our host arranged for us to have a briefing in the Situation Room in the basement of the White House. It is as you have seen it, with maple-paneled walls, arranged in sections that slide to the left and right, revealing video screens and

computer-driven images that bring the world into that room via satellite. Our host, a young husband and father about 35 years old, was a member of the Chevy Chase (MD) Presbyterian Church, the church served by our pastor contact in Washington for these interviews. The young Presbyterian elder worked for the National Security Administration. He had known all about Iran Contra for a year before it was made public in the press, causing a great threat to the administration's credibility. There, in that room, it was explained to us how we tracked our enemies overseas and how the president and his generals marshaled the firepower on air and ground to destroy our enemies when it was deemed necessary.

Six months after we had gone back home to our families and churches we learned from the pastor of the Chevy Chase Church that the young man who had been our host in the Situation Room had died of a fast moving colon cancer. It was enough to make my theologically-oriented mind wonder if there could be any connection between the toxic reality of world enemies who want to kill us and the fatal physical illness of a conscientious young Presbyterian who admitted that he struggled with a passage like our text for the day: "Love your enemies." I wondered to myself, "Is there any place for us to live

amid such apparent contradictions as the teaching of Jesus and the need for national security which can lead to destruction of our enemies?”

I have gone to some length with this story to illustrate, I hope objectively, the dilemma that is ours as Christians who want to take the teaching of Jesus seriously but find it nearly impossible in the world we live in. There are people out there who want to bring down the airplane you will board for your next business trip or visit to see your grandchildren. Not only do they want to bring down the airliner, they want to bring down the entire country. I am not being paranoid, nor are you, when we name Al Qaeda as an enemy to watch and to track and, eventually, to destroy. This is a full time occupation for thousands of Americans: tracking our enemies in order that the rest of us can live at peace.

But how shall we define “peace”? Where is there peace for a conscientious young Presbyterian who finds himself working for a government agency with the unenviable task of planning ways to destroy our enemies before they destroy us?

I suppose the way any of us lives with this dilemma is by compartmentalizing our thinking and our living,

including our living in the faith and teaching of Jesus. We see the contradictions and decide that there is no reconciling the two. Therefore, we decide to live in both worlds at different times, depending on the circumstances. This is a survival technique for us. We know that these are complex times. The world is a dangerous place. Our enemies are real. There appears to be little chance that they will change. We expect that we will live with this dark reality in the world, and a contrasting reality in the teaching of Jesus, for the rest of our days. Unless, and it is a big “unless”, *something changes in our world to bring the realities in the world (sworn enemies, real evil, toxicity that can kill, revenge as a first response, etc.) into closer alignment with the teaching of Jesus.*

What if we risked thinking and hoping like Jesus, risking looking like people of faith who actually believe that humankind will someday decide that God’s way may actually be the better way? What if, for instance, there is beginning in the Middle East, a revolution in political thought that will lead to more than just Egypt turning from dictatorship? What country will be next to begin a revolution? We understand that this will not happen in a matter of weeks but that it could begin to happen at all is enough to give us new hope: To give us new hope that

more nations of the world will actually see the wisdom of embracing a democratic form of government. Wouldn't it be ironic if the end of Al Qaeda's power and influence began with a *transformation* within the body politic that declared a need for the body of be purged of all such toxicity? What if the governments we have spent billions of dollars to support were to say, "Thanks for the help. We have seen the truth. The enemy is within. Hatred gets us only better at seeking to avenge our enemies. The way of reconciliation with those who oppose us is the way of life."

If there is no host for evil, evil goes elsewhere. But problem is that evil does not go on unscheduled leave and so we find this counterforce to the good ever-present somewhere in the world. Plenty of theological minds, Reinhold Niebuhr among them, have struggled with a perspective on evil, the evil that would encourage us to hate, not love, our enemies. Niebuhr's take on it is to say that evil will always be with us. Our challenge, as human beings, is to resist it and to do all that we can to counter its influence. In other words, take seriously your capacity to love, not hate, your enemies. This doesn't mean we have to like them nor does it mean we will always endorse their tactics. It does mean that we will seek to

see the humanity within each person, to attempt to understand how the other behaves and, sometimes, why that one behaves in that particular way.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is the entre' to the near-impossible expectations of Jesus we have been looking for. Perhaps, like Jesus, the way to bring the world to an understanding and practice of God's love is by loving as God does, one person at a time. Such incremental steps do have a way of accumulating, defining a path, suggesting a greater journey that embraces all people.

So often, it seems to me, we seek perfection in our ordering of society. In the political, educational, business, church, pop-cultural realms of our culture, just to name a few influential ones, we are shocked when certain individuals act in ways that we consider less than beneficial for the whole. There are people who will act selfishly, or impulsively, fearing a loss of control of their future. We see individuals stirring others into believing that there is no political solution open to us except theirs. We witness distortions of the truth by people who, we assume, are smart enough to know better. In the church

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons; 1941, 1943, 1949).

these are usually called heresies or worse; elsewhere they are considered the skewing of the truth in order to serve private, self-serving or power-accumulating motives. And more often than you might expect, we respond with dismay that individuals would act in such ways.

I think that Jesus held up high expectations of us knowing we would never reach them completely. But it is the reaching for them that seems to be the key to understanding why he would put such a goal as “loving your enemies” before us. Without that goal on our horizon we will aim too low and never even brush the target of completeness in our actions. Jesus speaks in large sweeping strokes in order to lift our eyes to see what we have never considered before: a vision of humanity that is not of humankind but of God.